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Director of Central Intelligence

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Soviet Military Forces in the Far East

National Intelligence Estimate
Volume I—Key Judgments

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1 September 1981

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SOVIET MILITARY FORCES IN THE FAR EAST

Volume I—Key Judgments

Information as of 28 August 1981 was used in the preparation of this Estimate.

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PREFACE

This Estimate describes the development of Soviet general purpose and theater nuclear forces in the Far East, examines the status of Soviet and Chinese forces along the Sino-Soviet border, and postulates likely Soviet strategy in case of war.[1] The Estimate is being published in two parts: the Key Judgments, which begin on page 1 of this document (volume I), and a more detailed supporting analysis (volume II). The Estimate generally covers a period of five years in its projections. It treats the following elements of Soviet military forces in the Far East:

— ***Ground Forces.*** The ground forces and their organic air defense and tactical nuclear forces.

— ***Air Forces.*** Tactical aviation, Military Transport Aviation, and medium- and long-range bombers.

— ***Air Defense Forces.*** The air and ground-based systems of the air defense forces.

— ***Naval Forces.*** The general purpose submarines, surface ships, aircraft, auxiliaries, and amphibious forces of the Pacific Ocean Fleet.

— ***Soviet Strategic Ballistic Missile Forces.*** Those land-based and submarine-launched ballistic missiles available for use in the Far Eastern theater.

— ***Support Functions.*** Those activities and organizations that support and integrate Soviet forces in the area, such as command, control, and communications systems and logistic services.

Other National Intelligence Estimates and Interagency Intelligence Memorandums contain comprehensive assessments of some issues that are given summary treatment in this document:

— NIE 11-4-78, *Soviet Goals and Expectations in the Global Power Arena*, Memorandum to Holders, 1981.

[1] For this Estimate, Soviet general purpose ground, air, and air defense forces in the Far East are those located in the USSR's Central Asian, Siberian, Transbaikal, and Far East Military Districts and Mongolia. Also covered in the Estimate are Soviet general purpose naval forces in the Pacific Ocean Fleet, including the Indian Ocean Squadron, and Soviet strategic forces that have a peripheral strike role against targets in the Far East. Mongolian national forces—which currently consist of some 25,000 men, most of whom are in noncombat units, and two combat brigades—are not considered in this Estimate.

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— NIE 11/13-80, *Sino-Soviet Relations in the Early 1980s.*

— NIE 11-3/8-80, *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through 1990.*

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— NI IIM 80-10010JX, *The Readiness of Soviet Naval Forces.*

— NIE 11-14-81, *Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO.*

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Determinants of Soviet Policy in the Far East

1. The Far East is second only to the European theater in importance for Soviet military policy. Its strategic value, combined with its remoteness from the heartland of greater Russia, makes regional security an especially difficult problem in Soviet eyes. In contrast with Europe, the USSR directly borders its major potential enemy. Furthermore, the long, slender supply line, the Trans-Siberian Railroad, is dangerously close to a hostile China—hence vulnerable to attack and interruption.

2. Although the Soviet military position in the Far East is now reasonably secure, the Soviets probably see growing challenges. They observe no basic change in China's hostile posture toward the USSR, and at the same time see intensified US pressure on Japan to assume a greater security role in Northeast Asia, evolving Sino-Japanese trade and political ties inimical to Soviet goals, and an evolving US-Chinese military relationship directed specifically against the USSR. They have also seen a reaffirmation by the United States of its commitment to maintain sizable forces in South Korea and to strengthen Seoul's political, economic, and military structure.

3. To meet these perceived challenges during the coming decade, the Soviets will continue to depend on superior military power as the critical instrument of foreign policy. Thus, changes to their military capabilities will be aimed at:

— Ensuring Soviet territorial security by deterring potential Chinese aggression or containing a Sino-Soviet conflict.

— Developing further Soviet offensive military capabilities and options in the region to improve their capability to inflict damage on China's military-industrial capability and seize all or portions of Manchuria.

— Countering US naval and air forces in the region.

— Preventing China from taking any advantage of Soviet involvement in a war with NATO.

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— Limiting American, Chinese, and Japanese influence in Asia.

— Frustrating and delaying the emergence of a "Washington-Beijing-Tokyo axis" with links to NATO.

— Encouraging the evolution of a Soviet-sponsored Asian collective security system.

In the last decade, the Soviets' military policy has led to a much stronger military posture in the Far East. However, their stationing of a division on the Japanese-claimed islands, their invasion of Afghanistan, and their support for Vietnam have all hampered Soviet regional political objectives.

4. The Soviets believe that the security of the USSR can best be guaranteed through the development of forces capable of decisive offensive operations. Thus, although the Soviets have established permanent fortifications in defensive zones along the border with China, they are not resigned to conducting a static defense. They have developed a decisive conventional and nuclear military capability to give them the capacity for major offensive operations beyond their own borders. Whether the Far East would be a defensive theater for the Soviets or whether they would attempt to seize and hold major portions of Chinese territory would depend on factors such as their political objectives, the degree of their superiority over Chinese forces, and the military situation in other theaters. In a strictly Sino-Soviet war, the Chinese should expect an offensive to seize portions of North China and establish new buffer zones along the frontier. In a NATO–Warsaw Pact war the United States would be faced with operations designed to deny maritime areas adjacent to the USSR and prevent the use of Japanese bases.

Force Trends

5. The buildup of Soviet forces in the Far East has proceeded through two relatively distinct phases. The first, from 1965 through the early 1970s, was characterized by rapid growth of ground and air combat force levels. The second, since the early 1970s, has been marked by slower growth and emphasis on enhancing existing forces through weapon modernization, improvements in the combat support infrastructure, and the development of new command structures to better control and employ the forces. The Soviet military has emerged from this 15-year process with a substantial portion of its general purpose forces committed in the Far East. The Soviets have established a

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balanced force structure for theater warfare and are capable of an effective defense and strong offensive operations:

— Roughly a threefold increase in the number of ground force divisions and a fivefold increase in fixed-wing aircraft have been accompanied by an expansion of support forces and substantial increases in the numbers of tanks, artillery, armed helicopters, and air defenses. About a quarter of the total Soviet ground and tactical air forces are now located in the Far East.

— The Pacific Ocean Fleet (the largest of the four Soviet fleets) has grown modestly and has acquired more capable surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, replenishment ships, and aircraft.

— There has been substantial growth and modernization of the theater and strategic nuclear delivery systems available for use against targets in the region. More than half of the SS-20 IRBM force, for example, can be targeted against China.[2]

Soviet Strategy and Capabilities

6. Defense planners in Moscow must consider several potential conflicts in the Far East, including, for example, a direct confrontation with China; actions against US air and naval forces only; and a simultaneous two-front war with NATO and China.

7. ***Conflict With China.*** Soviet options in a strictly Sino-Soviet conflict—which would be primarily a land and air campaign—could range from large-scale raids with limited objectives to a full-scale invasion of western and northeastern China supported by nuclear strikes (see map). Soviet objectives under any option would be conditioned in part by historical national aspirations, the international political environment, the military situation in other theaters, and the causes of the conflict. We believe, however, that military as well as political considerations probably would discourage the Soviets from pursuing the total defeat and surrender of China or attempting the long-term military occupation of the Chinese heartland.

[2] *The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, believes that over the past 15 years the Soviets have increased the size of their forces in the Far East more than necessary for a successful defense against China. The Soviets have sufficient units, equipment, and supplies in the region to undertake major offensive operations. Despite the Soviet advantages in conventional war-fighting capabilities, Soviet exercises and overall force capabilities suggest that Soviet war planning against China envisions the first use of both tactical and strategic nuclear forces.*

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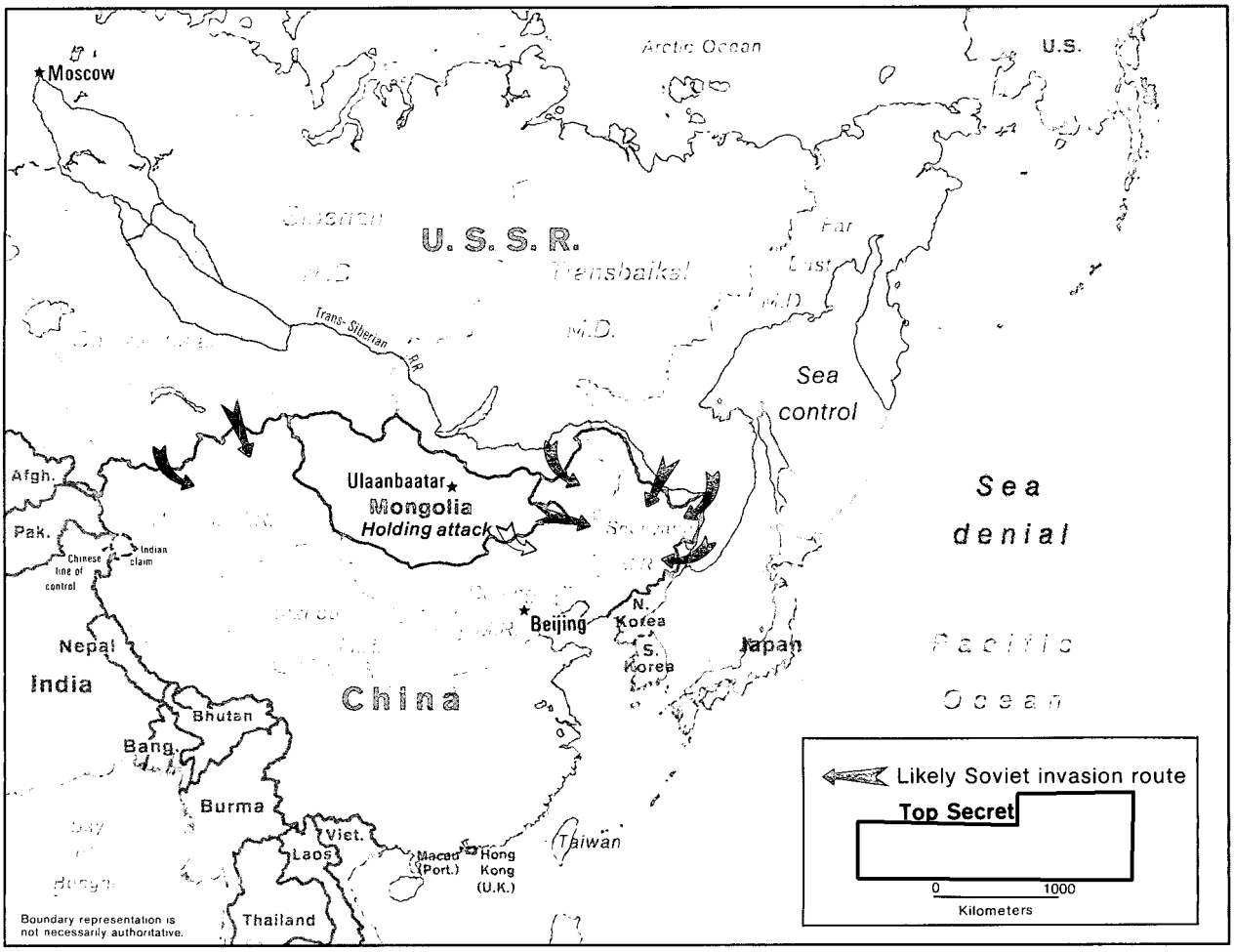
Soviet Wartime Operating Areas



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8. We credit the Soviets with the following capabilities:

— They could stop a Chinese general ground offensive—a contingency we judge as highly unlikely—and could quickly mount a punishing counterattack.

— They could mount ground incursions, supported by tactical air forces, into northern China with a good chance of initial success. They would have to consider, however, that anything beyond shallow penetrations could lead to protracted guerrilla warfare.

— They could overrun and hold Manchuria (the Shenyang Military Region and the northernmost portion of the Beijing Military Region) if provided substantial reinforcements from elsewhere in the USSR or with the extensive use of nuclear weapons.

— In most circumstances, however, it is unlikely Moscow would draw down its strategic reserves substantially because of its preoccupation with NATO. Moreover, once deep into China, Soviet forces would have to fight a well-entrenched enemy in inhospitable terrain at the end of long and tenuous supply lines.

— The Soviets have a substantial advantage over China in chemical warfare capabilities which, in the absence of a substantial Chinese chemical or tactical nuclear retaliatory capability and because of general Chinese vulnerabilities, provides the Soviets with a credible option to initiate chemical warfare if the situation requires it.

9. The Soviets have a vast nuclear superiority and could conduct nuclear strikes throughout China. Nonetheless, we believe that, in a Soviet counterforce attack, sufficient Chinese ballistic missiles would survive (because of their concealed and dispersed deployment as well as mobility and hardness) to deliver a small but destructive retaliatory strike. We believe this constitutes a constraint to an unprovoked Soviet nuclear attack.

10. ***Operations Against US Forces.*** Moscow perceives a direct threat to its security from US naval and air forces in the Far East, and the modernization of the Pacific Ocean Fleet represents an attempt to counter the US Navy. In a NATO-Pact war, the most pressing tasks of the Pacific Ocean Fleet's general purpose forces would be to establish sea control in waters contiguous to the USSR and in Soviet ballistic

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missile submarine patrol areas and to conduct sea denial operations out to about 1,500 nautical miles. Soviet air force elements would have missions against US bases in the region.

11. In a war with NATO we would expect the Soviets to take actions against US naval forces in the Pacific and believe the Soviets probably would not consider such attacks as directly risking wider hostilities with China or Japan. We believe neither of those countries poses much of an offensive threat and neither is likely to enter a major war with the USSR unprovoked. Additionally, the Soviets probably would pressure the Japanese to deny the United States the use of naval and air facilities. Failing this, however, the Soviets probably would attack these facilities.

12. We believe Soviet forces would have the following capabilities:

— The Soviets would pose a substantial threat to any surface force that penetrated their sea denial area. On the other hand, we do not believe that Soviet ASW forces can effectively detect US submarines in the open ocean. In the Seas of Japan and Okhotsk and the approaches to Petropavlovsk, favorable geography and extensive ASW forces would alleviate some of the impact of the limitations of Soviet open-ocean detection capability. Major operations outside these sea control and sea denial areas probably would be deferred as long as the Soviets perceived a serious maritime threat to their homeland or ballistic missile submarine force.

— The Soviets probably would expect to make limited use of bases in Vietnam, but we do not anticipate large-scale operations, because of Vietnam's distance from the USSR. We are uncertain about the degree of support the Vietnamese would offer.

— The Soviets could not mount large-scale ground force attacks in the Aleutians or on the Alaskan mainland, but US facilities in Alaska could be targets for airstrikes or commando teams. Moscow might anticipate that limited airstrikes or nuisance raids on US territory could pin down US forces needed elsewhere.

13. ***Simultaneous Wars With NATO and China.*** Simultaneous wars with China and NATO would represent an extreme situation for the Soviets, and Soviet planners have been increasingly occupied with this contingency in the last decade. In such a contingency, the Soviet priority of effort would be against NATO, and we judge that Moscow

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would avoid operations in the Far East that would prevent a quick victory in Europe.

14. We do not believe the risk of precipitating simultaneous hostilities with China would preclude a decision by the Soviets to go to war with NATO. Although they would prefer not to fight wars in Europe and Asia at the same time, we believe they could sustain concurrent, large-scale combat in both theaters for a number of months. If a war in both theaters were prolonged, however, Soviet capabilities to support major offensive operations in Asia would be severely strained by logistic, personnel, and materiel constraints. The Soviets also would consider that an attack on China could develop into a long-term, large-scale commitment of manpower and materiel which would compete with and ultimately could weaken their European war effort.

15. ***Other Contingencies.*** A renewal of fighting between China and Vietnam would lead to increased Soviet support of an important ally. We would expect the Soviet reaction to be similar to that after the Chinese attack in 1979: an initial propaganda campaign and a substantial increase in material aid to Vietnam. If the conflict were prolonged or were going badly for Vietnam, limited Soviet military actions against China would be possible.

16. The Soviet response to a renewal of conflict between North and South Korea would depend heavily on the Chinese reaction and the level of US involvement. The Soviets would perceive a rapid cessation of hostilities to be in their best interest. The Soviets probably would provide some materiel support to the North but probably would conclude that the risks attending direct combat support would far outweigh the possible benefits unless the North were in danger of total collapse.

Future Prospects

17. We foresee no development over the next several years that would appreciably alter the current Soviet military strategy in the Far East or modify the USSR's effort to maintain and improve the capabilities of its large standing forces in the region. We expect that Moscow's concerns over China's rapprochement with the United States and Japan will prompt the Soviets to continue to expand some service elements to maintain their military advantage in the region.

18. The initiation of a major Chinese force improvement program focused on introducing advanced weapons technology into Chinese forces—an unlikely prospect even if supported by the United States—

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could spark unanticipated changes in the Soviet posture in the region. The Soviets initially would most likely respond to even a modest level of Sino-US military cooperation by a combination of diplomatic protest and observable military moves to demonstrate their resolve to counter such a program. The longer term response probably would involve some acceleration of improvement programs already planned.

19. Given current Chinese modernization priorities, we judge that there is little likelihood of a fundamental shift toward military modernization or of a substantial Western-supported program to import high-technology weapon systems in the next five years. Consequently, we expect the Soviets to continue their program of gradual but steady force growth and modernization in the Far East:

— We expect the number of Soviet ground force divisions in the Far East to increase by perhaps one to two new active divisions per year in the next five years. The number of fixed-wing combat aircraft also will increase slightly.

— We believe the Pacific Ocean Fleet will continue to be structured primarily to oppose US naval forces, although the Navy also may have to devote more attention and resources to offset the gradual growth in Japanese naval capabilities.

20. Over the next five years, we expect the Soviets' policy in the Far East will continue to focus on the containment of China. They will avoid military or political extremes, and short-term force improvements will be modest. Over the longer term, however, the Soviet effort will provide Moscow with improved defensive capabilities against not only Chinese forces but also against US forces in Asia in a large-scale conflict with the West. Additionally, it will provide the USSR with increased capability for offensive operations against China.[3]

[3] *The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, believes that the Soviets are likely to avoid political and military extremes and crash military buildups, but Soviet force improvements will follow at least the same steady, increasing trend as in the recent past.*

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